THE WASTESCAPES OF SAMANÁ
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Abstract
We conducted a formative research study on the peninsula of Samaná, in the northeast corner of the Dominican Republic, focused on how people viewed, categorized, and handled solid waste. With the passage of a new law, a motivated government administration is now addressing the solid waste crisis on the peninsula. Here, we examine some of the pre-existing attitudes about the solid waste of Samaná residents. Results from the study reveal that, contrary to many assumptions, local Dominicans are aware of the waste crisis and, in fact, are often depressed and anxious over it, even as they feel angry and helpless about how to resolve it. On closer examination and drawing on Appadurai’s theoretical framework of “scapes,” we can understand that the waste crisis is not a local problem, and, as such, sustainable solutions need to include a broader effort to control plastic entering the environment.

Keywords: Dominican Republic, wastescapes, environment

In the Dominican Republic (DR) province of Samaná, it is easy to hear expatriates, Dominicans from other regions of the country, and even locals complain that people don’t care about trash and throw it donde quiera, wherever. These folks lay blame on parents who do not properly socialize their children, a government that fails at education, and a society in transition that has lost its values and traditions. The evidence for this perspective is literally donde quiera—wherever one looks. Garbage continues to clog drains, litter roadways, and frustrate residents. The system to address solid waste was struggling until 2020, when there was a change in the national government, and a bill that had been waiting for approval was made into law. The current government elevated the crisis to a priority. In October of 2020, bill number 225-20 was passed into law: The General Law of the Comprehensive Management and Co-Processing of Solid Waste. The new legislation, a motivated national government, and NGOs all recognized that the health of the economy and environment are critically impacted by the failed attempts to resolve the waste crisis. The background research to understand the perspectives of the residents of Samaná is key to inform the sector on how and where solid waste management (SWM) is lacking. This paper reports on those findings and also expands the lens to broaden our understanding of this waste crisis.

The United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Clean Cities, Blue Ocean (CCBO) program initiated a formative research study on SWM to understand waste in Samaná. Ultimately, the study spoke to stakeholders at all levels of SWM. This paper focuses on how residents viewed, categorized, and handled solid waste. We would like, however, to expand on their perspectives to include the “wastescapes” in Samaná; through the lens of “scapes” (Appadurai, 1996), we can explore SWM challenges with a wider lens. Appadurai conceptualizes -scapes as a way of understanding the fluidity, permeability, and the distortions of Westernized processes in the context of globalization. Here, there is an emphasis that the translation of these processes may not play out as actors expect for various reasons.
According to the UNDP, the DR overall has experienced improvements in the Human Development Index over the past several decades. Life expectancy and years of schooling have increased, and the per capita GNI nearly tripled from 1990 to 2017 (UNDP, 2018). According to the World Bank (2020), the DR is one of the fastest-growing economies in the region. This economic expansion has reduced poverty from 31.1% in 2001 to 15.2% in 2020 (Macrotrends, 2023). The percentage of the population living in urban zones increased from 30% to over 80% from 1960 to 2019, and at the same time, the overall population more than tripled from 3.2 million to 10.7 million (World Bank, 2020). An expansion in tourism and the increase in income and a middle-class lifestyle resulted in a significant expansion in the consumption of commercial goods. During the same period, debt service and economic policies created a context that limits the national government and hence municipalities' ability to effectively address services such as solid waste (Goffi et al., 2020; Sletto & Nygren, 2015).1

Samaná, the name of the peninsula, province, and capital city in the northeasternmost corner of the DR, is home to over 100,000 residents, with an estimated 180,000 tourists passing through each year (ONE, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic took its toll, but for the province, the pandemic only changed the type of tourist who came to visit. With restrictions in the large urban centers, for example, Santo Domingo, once off-beat locations suddenly became domestic destinations for those escaping curfews. The emerging middle class made weekend pilgrimages to the beautiful beaches, lush waterfalls, and other attractions across the province. Many expatriates had already begun to gobble up property and were capitalizing on an eco-tourism and boutique hotel trend; the pandemic did not significantly affect this boom either.

Figure 1
Visitors to a Beach on the Samaná Peninsula
(Photo by Kathleen Skoczen)

Studying Basura (Trash)

It was at the beginning of the pandemic that CCBO initiated research on what was already an environmental crisis of unchecked plastic waste washing into the ravines, streets, streams, rivers, and ultimately the ocean from across the peninsula. The study was designed to gain a holistic understanding of household, community, and regional waste disposal management in Samaná. The portion focusing on households consisted of 154 interviewees, conducted by three researchers on the ground, with three supervisors, Naty Pantaleón, Daniel Abreu (co-authors on this paper who contribute to the collection and analysis of the data presented herein), and myself, who also directed this portion of the study under the leadership of Laurie Krieger, a practicing medical anthropologist. As the primary author and the writer of this paper, I include here my many years of observation in Samaná; much of this paper is based on my personal experience: September 1985-December 1987 as Peace Corps Volunteer, January 1991-April 1992 doing dissertation research, and numerous month-long field trips beginning in 1989 for various research projects. Thus, my experience in Samaná includes living and researching throughout the peninsula. Many of the people I met in 1985 and on the many trips thereafter are now considered family, and thus, I am in constant contact with them. The historical observations are my own.

From 2020 to 2021, CCBO charged our team with exploring peoples' perceptions of trash; existing and historical 3R (reduce, reuse, recycle) practices and SWM; understanding regarding what should be done with the trash; views on the economic and social costs of litter; and potential and practical solutions to the waste crisis. Based on my experiences in Samaná, we also added distinctions people made between “private” and “public” waste. We balanced the demographic participants to include males and females, religion, age, and educational diversity, and we did not exclude non-Dominicans, although expatriate residents only accounted for 16 of our participants, and they were clustered in touristic zones.

The Findings

Through hours of interviewing and subsequent data analysis, many themes emerged. Residents associated trash with contamination/pollution, sickness, foulness, and/or dirtiness. Much like Mary Douglas (1966) described, dirt is something out of place and thus is inherently...
dangerous or threatening, as it has the potential to undermine the social order. Samaná is a perfect case of dirt out of place: “When there is a lot of garbage, people get sick” (Las Terrenas, woman). Many people across the peninsula were concerned the garbage was deteriorating the quality of life and putting tourism at risk. Nonetheless, many participants recognized the distinction between garbage that is problematic (“It damages nature”) and garbage that serves a purpose, for example, organic waste (“[trash] can be beneficial if we use it well, there are different types. When a tree [dies], it provides fertilizer”) (Samaná, man).

The volume of inorganic waste found throughout the peninsula on roadsides, shorelines, rivers, streams, and clogging culverts and drains created problems for the surrounding communities. While many participants implied that people were impervious to the amount of trash surrounding them, the participants themselves rarely were:

Before when I was a child, I would not see as much garbage as I see now. First, people have no hygiene at home. Second, on the part of the mayors, the politicians used to take care of it. Now they do not insist on cleaning the town. Third, a lack of education. All of us, humanity, human beings, do not have that rule of having hygiene, which starts in the house. There is no law that fines those who litter. (Samaná woman)

...[T]he people, who drink a lot of soda, due to the lack of awareness, who do not become aware, many times (have) a small bottle of water, a drink, or soda, (and) throw it there and that does not matter. You have to see how to raise their awareness a little more, for the people, so that people don’t keep doing that kind of thing. (Arroyo Barril, man)

Sincerely, not only the garbage in the house has to be eliminated, many people send (people carrying garbage for others) here to dump garbage on the beach, and when they leave it, you have to take care of it. The plastics are burned, all the garbage bags that they throw away must be burned... The truck only goes through the main street. It does not come down here. (Sánchez, man)

Another consistent theme was how trash has changed. Research participants viewed the introduction of plastic as bringing all kinds of problems and fundamentally changing the game in terms of trash. When asked what kind of garbage was found in the streets, of 524 items mentioned, all but 91 responses were some kind of plastic: bottles, Styrofoam (foam), bags, and packaging. While public trash was mostly plastic, trash in the home was also plastic:

I think of plastics, when you speak of trash, the only thing that comes to my mind is all the plastic and foam plates I see. (Sánchez, woman)

Mostly plastics, foam, bottles. From the streets and people when they go to the beach, they throw it and it is dragged into the sea. (Samaná, woman)

Plastic does not degrade. If a woman goes to the store five times; she comes home with five plastic bags. Now the ocean smells of plastic, it doesn’t smell of vegetation. (Sánchez, man)

In Las Galeras, interviewees thought the situation had deteriorated significantly. The once sleepy outpost is now a popular beach destination with an expanding expatriate population. Participants complained that most public trash is being brought in, noting that items left on the beach are often expensive brands that are not sold locally and are found only in Santo Domingo. Tour guides who depend on clean, pristine beaches reported returning Monday after a busy weekend for beach clean-ups. On a Tripadvisor post about a Las Galeras beach entitled “Losing it,” the author noted in December 2020 the beach was “as filthy as we have ever seen it, with plastic everywhere.” One midweek holiday, an isolated beach hosted 18 buses with 58 passengers each. In Las Terrenas, during a popular national holiday, traffic was so dense that cars and buses came to a standstill, and residents could not leave their homes. While money changes hands locally to some degree, many residents lament that tourists come, bring their own food, party, and leave no impact on the local community other than their trash. For the locals hoping to hawk goods or food on the beach or take visitors to ecotourist destinations, the investment in maintaining a pristine environment is essential:

It is not that we have garbage here, but that the people here in Las Galeras do not consume as much plastic as the people who come, because everyone who comes Saturday and Sunday is at the beach, 800 people come, 1000 people, all those people bring a bag, others bring a cooler,
they drink 10 beers, 4 water bottles, that garbage stays here, they do not take it away, that is the problem with garbage on the beaches; here there are not trash cans everywhere, that is another problem. There should be a trash can, [and] a person in charge of collecting that garbage on the beaches and there is none, that is the problem that exists on the beaches that affects us, it is not us. (Las Galeras, man)

Garbage collection services, particularly in hard-to-reach locations, are consistently poor or non-existent. Community members voiced concerns that the trash is jeopardizing the economy. One woman proclaimed: “The tourists see this and they don’t want to eat anything because of this trash.” A fisherman in Sánchez told us that the plastic was affecting the fish and shrimp industries: “In the morning when I go fishing, in the water you can see ashes that appear to come from the dump.” Trash was also taking a psychological toll: “trash is a trauma, a worry.” Repeatedly, participants identified plastic trash as the problem. Once the waste in Samaná was not simply trash, their roadsides, their beaches, etc., but that it is invisible to them (e.g., see Dunn, 2019).

The evidence from Samaná suggests that waste is not invisible; instead, classifying waste, reusing, repurposing, and recycling is and has been part of waste management. Many people make a business out of the 3Rs. Nonetheless, with significant transformations in consumption, the relationship between the waste and residents, communities, and the environment has changed.

**Figure 2**

**Vendor Entering Samaná**

Plastic has become the new normal in kitchens across the peninsula.

(Photograph by Kathleen Skoczen)

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**Consumerism and Trash in Samaná**

Increased consumption is, at first glance, related to economic growth—a product of a fabulously successful tourism sector. The expansion of consumer purchasing power has undoubtedly been responsible for the expansion in trash. In the 1980s, most plastic goods came from the Capital of Santo Domingo or other commercial centers. A limited number of people in Samaná could afford these goods; since they were highly valued, people carefully used and reused the items. People used discarded bleach bottles to carry and store water. Individuals reused any plastic tub or bottle for storage. They repaired plastic *chancletas* (flip flops) endlessly. Households furnished their homes with locally-made wood furniture and considered any house decorations as luxuries. Glass soda bottles existed exclusively in a closed-loop system. The one store in Samaná that offered plastic goods in the 1980s was small, cramped, and had a limited array of plastic items tucked between clothes, school supplies, dishes, fabrics, sewing supplies, etc. Garbage included plastic, but it was limited, rare, and well worn. Most of the trash produced was organic, which was burned in the backyard. Municipal garbage collection was inconsistent and sporadic; people in the city and in hamlets often took care of their own waste.

The 1990s ushered in a new era where imports infiltrated even smaller shops. These imports were often made of or wrapped in plastic. Reusable plastic bottles were far more common and slowly becoming less of a cherished item. It was early in the 1990s that the plastic soda bottle arrived first in 2-liter bottles, then in the ubiquitous 16-ounce and 12-ounce containers; there are a lot. (Arroyo Barril, woman)

I feel frustrated, powerless, sad. I wish there was a change. I think of biodiversity, both on land and in the sea as in all living things. Micro-plastics and micro-foam are my biggest frustrations. (Las Galeras, Woman)

There is an assumption that working-class Dominicans are not affected by the garbage inundating their neighborhoods, their roadsides, their beaches, etc., but that it is invisible to them (e.g., see Dunn, 2019). The evidence from Samaná suggests that waste is not invisible; instead, classifying waste, reusing, repurposing, and recycling is and has been part of waste management. Many people make a business out of the 3Rs. Nonetheless, with significant transformations in consumption, the relationship between the waste and residents, communities, and the environment has changed.

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Yes, tired, I think I have anger, helplessness. Now there is more. Before the production of consumer products did not come so much in plastic. Consumerism also hurts me. (Las Galeras, woman)

I would like someone to take control of the [plastic...
bottles. Single-use plastics (SUP)—foam plates, cups, and plastic silverware—were easily accessible, convenient, and conveyed a sense of modernity and hygiene, particularly when serving guests or at church outings. Foreigners and well-traveled and well-heeled Dominicans desired supermercados. Rather than go to the old market where the messy business of butchering stood alongside tables of locally grown vegetables, one could now find rice, beans, tomato paste, ketchup, oil, vinegar, etc., all in nicely sealed plastic bags or bottles. Gourmet veggies like broccoli were wrapped in celophane on foam trays. This hygienic presentation was associated with a modernizing economy. The burn pile in the backyard was transforming into a source of smelly, irritating, toxic smoke. The garbage might resemble that in a North American home, but the fate of the trash was radically different. No recycling bins with instruction sheets accompanied this new array of plastic. Men in trucks who would wind through streets and alleys looking for recyclable scrap metal, glass bottles, and/or cardboard never offered to take the plastic: there was no market. Plastic was truly “something out of place.”

The 2000s realized the boom in tourism and an expansion of wealth across the DR that led to increased spending and consumption. Chimichurri (hamburger) and pica pollo (fried chicken) stands offered convenience to workers with longer hours away from home. At this time, portable to-go containers became ubiquitous alongside the expanding SUP. Foam clamshells, plates, cups, and bottles were on the sides of the road, in ravines, and eventually in the bay of Samaná. Public parks and waterfront benches were popular spots to lounge but frequently lacked garbage cans. The municipal government seemed perplexed about how to manage public trash, as bins along the boardwalk in Samaná would fill and cause their own problems. Imported goods began to fill the garbage pile, and dumps became an imposing presence and nuisance for residents. Hordes of flies would sometimes descend on nearby neighborhoods, often accompanied by a choking haze of burnt plastic.

Late into the 2010s, nearly everything came wrapped in or made of plastic. As wealth increased, the ability to buy these new, modern items normalized. Markets that sell in bulk still exist but are now a poor cousin to the newer, bigger “Supermercados,” resembling grocery stores in Miami or Toronto, where foreign and domestic brands vie for shelf space. The expansion of plastic items like chairs, tables, trash cans, baskets, etc., made life easier, and they were relatively cheap, even if not so durable. The local five and dime in Samaná was bought out, and a “China shop” doubled its size to sell an assortment of plastic: SUP, toys, clocks, jewelry, shoes, boots, pails, mops, brooms, storage containers—big and small, decorations for every season, and so on. These shops have expanded on the peninsula, and they now have competition from local vendors.

There have been multiple attempts to address recycling across the peninsula. Indeed, the apathy that someone might encounter is the consequence of these many unsuccessful attempts. One well-meaning program implemented by a donor country used colored sacks to classify waste, and people were to deposit these recyclables into color-coordinated dumpsters in town. As women watched the colored dumpsters get loaded into the trucks altogether and carted off to the dump, they stopped participating. There have been other attempts, but perhaps the biggest struggle has been funding and structure at the local level. Experts working on recycling have recognized these programs are not sustainable on their own—they need sustained government support and funding. Picking up garbage on the beach, only to send it to the same insecure dump where it will wash out once again, is simply and logically a waste of energy. Local Dominicans in Samaná recognize this, and although non-locals may think Samaná residents are indifferent, they are not uninformed. Their
options about what they buy and how they dispose of it are shaped not on the household level, not in classrooms of second graders, but are influenced and, at times, outright determined at a national and international level. In other words, these decisions are not simply local but take place in the context of a globalizing society: “the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 42).

Wastescapes

Appadurai (1996), in his seminal work on globalization, identifies five types of scapes: “The suffix scape also allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes” (p. 297). Scapes emphasize a globalizing world where people (ethnoscapes—immigrants, tourists, refugees, guest workers, etc.), technology (technoscapes—mechanical and informational, but here technologies and expertise surrounding solid waste management), money (finanscapes—movement of capital, investments—here tourism investment and tourist dollars), ideas (ideoescapes—e.g., tourism, eco-tourism, free trade, consumerism), and information and marketing (mediascapes—e.g., desirability, high status, modernity) flow across borders, often in ways that are not predictable, equitable or even probable: “the complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics that we have only begun to theorize” or understand (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33).

Drawing on Appadurai’s work, we might think about garbage and solid waste management as a wastescape. Waste is not merely a localized phenomenon alongside a diversifying and expanding economy. Plastic waste moves into Samaná via imported products and out of Samaná—hoped for recycling hubs but mostly into the environment and ultimately into the surrounding oceans. Much of what we found in this research easily articulates with Appadurai’s scapes. The ethnoscapes (tourists, expatriates, tourism employees, etc.) has a profound effect on how actors locally, nationally, and even internationally think about, contribute to, and respond to shifting wastescapes. The technoscapes is an example of the disjunctures that occurs when, entangled with finanscapes and ideoescapes, wastescapes move beyond local and national borders. There are new items on the trash pile, waste practices that do not modernize along with the shopping cart, disconnected recycling programs that come and go, and dumps that were not designed and are not easily refitted to address the changes in consumerism and so on. Imported goods from global markets, for example, China, North America, and Europe, are enmeshed in the finanscapes, the mediascapes, and ethnoscapes of the DR and, in turn, contribute to the shifting and warping wastescapes of Samaná.

The story of plastic has much to tell us about the fluidity and unpredictability of wastescapes. At the same time, the DR has been importing plastic (PEIPRD, 2022) in bulk and through imported commodities, the DR also produces and exports plastic. Plastic accounts for a significant part of industrial production and, in 2021, accounted for 4.5% of exports. (PEIPRD, 2022; Trading Economics, n.d.). The plastics industry in the DR has seen significant growth since 2015 and is a key sector (PEIPRD, 2022). It is not merely that the culture of plastic consumption is an imported ideoescape and/or mediascape; rather, it is now enmeshed in the country’s GDP even as it is a liability and risk to the biggest sector of the economy: tourism. Plastics have moved into spaces that go unchecked and unheeded, to the benefits of international and national elites, leaving local communities to address the stigma and cleanup of something that is out of place.

The concept of wastescapes clarifies and emphasizes that while we can think about local solutions to the problem of waste, we can only begin to address and hence resolve the trash and plastic crisis if we recognize that this crisis occurs in a world of unequal and “profoundly unpredictable” entanglements with ethnoscapes, finanscapes, technoscapes, ideoescapes, and mediascapes (Appadurai, 1996). The notion that the garbage problem is one of will or manpower overlooks the flow of the waste across and within borders. Plastic trash impacts communities in irregular and unpredictable ways and is tightly enmeshed in these scapes: people far from Samaná make decisions, pull levers, and ultimately benefit from a globalized system of production, consumption, and disposal. To suggest that the waste crisis is simply a matter of education is inherently problematic; it is a problem of volume, as emphasized again and again by our study participants.

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References


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